

WORKING AT ST MARGARETS RAILWAY STATION AROUND 1970

BY
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This article looks at the operation of St Margarets Railway Station from the perspective of those who worked there in and around 1970. The railway branch line to Hertford East and the station itself had undergone significant changes in the late 1950s and early 1960s, including electrification which came with new trains, overhead wires, new signalling and a considerably increased train service. At the same time the number of staff at the station had been reduced and many of the facilities for passengers discontinued. The new faster and more frequent electric trains had seen an upturn in passenger numbers, particularly by those commuting to London. However, the closure of the Buntingford Line in 1964 had seen passengers, mainly London commuters, diverted away from St Margarets to commence their journeys at Bishops Stortford and Ware stations. By 1970 the staff at St Margarets had been reduced to just 6 members of staff which included three signalmen, two leading porters and one booking clerk. Between them they covered all the work required at the station 24 hours a day. The railway was in a period of transition at this time and this article provides a snapshot of life at the station as it existed between 1968 and 1972.



The "ST. MARGARETS" sign above was one of two which once adorned the two gable ends of the signal box in British Railways days.



The above view photographed in the spring of 1969 shows the 1864 main station building facing the bridge over the river Lea and Stanstead Abbots beyond. The station sign above the entrance dates from the late 1940s and had replaced a very similar LNER sign that had been there since the mid -1920s. The picture was taken from the station car park which in those days was not marked out in bays but merely fenced around with metal railings.

Weekdays started when one of the porters arrived at the station about 5.10 am, after a short walk from their home on the folly estate where they both lived. The first task being to visit the signal box and collect the keys to the station left there by their late shift counterpart. There was just over ten minutes to open up the booking hall and turn on the platform lights and the many other little tasks required first thing in the morning. Many of which had to wait while the first down train from London arrived with the all-important newspapers. The porter, assisted by the train guard, moved the bundles of newspapers from the Guards brake van onto a four wheeled railway barrow which after the train had departed, was then pushed with some effort to the level crossing. Usually present by that time was Mr Ken Burton a well-known village character who ran the Burton's Newsagents shop in the middle of Stanstead Abbots High Street. He was to go to the station early in the morning to collect the papers on most days for quite a few decades. The porter would help Mr Burton put the bundles of newspapers into the back of his car. Whilst this was happening Mr Burton would deftly pull out two different newspapers from the string bound bundles. One was for the station staff the other for the signal box. A sort of daily thank-you for the railway staffs help every morning, come rain or snow. After Mr Burton drove away the next most important task was usually to put the kettle on for the first of the day's many cups of tea.



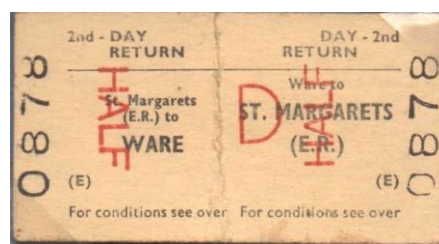
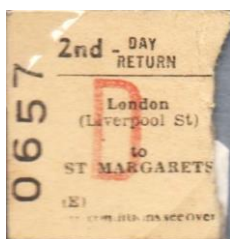
The above picture was taken in August 1971 from the driving cab of an electric multiple unit train as it approached St Margarets station from Rye House. The old hand wound gates had been replaced by the modern lifting barrier type in November 1970. To the right can be seen part of the original 1843 station building, used after the last Stationmaster had left until the early 1970s as a railway workers rented home. Very prominent in the picture is the concrete footbridge erected in 1958/9 as part of the electrification of the line. Electric trains, after testing trials during the early part of the year, took over the passenger services in November 1960.

The two porters at St Margarets around 1970 were Mr Jack Sutton and Mr Ernie Marchant who worked opposite shifts which were swapped weekly. The morning shift was 5.10 am to 1.30 pm and the late shift 3.30 pm until after the last train had departed sometime after 11.30 pm, later on a Saturday. Sundays were very different with one person doing a 12-hour shift 6am to 6 pm the other having that Sunday off. One weekday was in theory supposed to be a rest day, but very often both men would work a six or even a seven-day week. Rest days when worked, were paid at time and a half and a twelve-hour shift on a Sunday provided double the normal hourly pay rates. This was quite an incentive for many railway workers to work overtime.

A porter's duties at the start of the day included placing money in the large specially designed cash drawer near the booking office window, putting the correct printing letter/number blocks in the date stamping machine and generally preparing for the sale of tickets to the general public. In the past porters were more focused on platform duties but by 1970 their jobs had changed to be focused on the sale of tickets to the passengers outside the hours a booking clerk was on duty. Only leaving the booking office to go out onto the platforms when trains were stopping at the station. For much of the day four trains an hour stopped at the station. This meant that by 1970 the once busy porter's room at St Margarets Station was hardly used by staff at all. By 7am the frequency of trains increased from 30-minute intervals to every 20 minutes in each direction which continued until the end of the morning rush hour. This was a very busy time of day when the up platform saw large numbers of passengers waiting for trains that would arrive at Liverpool Street station before 9am. A much more limited peak of passengers was witnessed on the Hertford bound platform between 8 and 9 am, where once again a more frequent 20-minute interval service was provided.

In theory a booking clerk would arrive for duty just before 7am for an eight-hour shift. However, by 1970 there was a shortage of staff on the railway and there was no permanent booking clerk appointed to St Margarets station. Reliance was placed on relief staff who might only be at St Margarets for three hours or so, just long enough to balance the financial books for the last 24 hours, before leaving for another station to repeat the same there. This meant that porters had more work to do selling tickets than they would otherwise have had. It also meant there was no one to sell or collect tickets in the early afternoon for about two hours, between the early shift porter going home and the late turn porter starting their duties. Things were quieter on late turn and the return of commuters from London, mostly season ticket holders, occurring between 6pm and 8pm. Once again, the train service was every 20 minutes. Ticket sales in the evening being mostly limited to those visiting Ware and Hertford for leisure activities. Few passengers boarded or alighted from the last few trains of the day. After the last train had departed the station lights were turned out, the building locked up and the keys taken back for safe keeping with the signalman. It was the same signalman, close to the end of his night turn shift, that handed the keys to the early shift porter the next day. This early morning task saw the daily cycle of trains and duties starting over once again.

A SELECTION OF TICKETS FROM ABOUT 1970



*These Edmundson type tickets were date stamped on the back when issued using a date stamping machine. These machines created a characteristic thumping sound when the ticket was stamped. Using the machine could well bruise the user's fingers until they got the knack of avoiding the closing jaws whilst date stamping. All the tickets above were issued from St Margarets Station except the one in the top left corner issued for a single journey to St Margarets. A **D** indicates a cheap day return ticket valid off peak and an **R** was used to indicate the return half of a ticket which required the passenger to surrender one half of the ticket at the end of the outward journey.*

Much of the railwaymen's work that had been a major part of their jobs in the 1950s, were by the late 1960s no longer carried out. The public toilet closets for both men and women had been closed with only the men's urinals being left available. This meant that after some 60 plus years the daily chores of cleaning the toilets and emptying the penny in the slot door locks of coins, no longer took place. As railway stations threw nothing away the old toilet cash book records were still in the booking office, a faithful record of decades of a daily task. A good proportion of the booking office, that had once served as a parcels office now stood unused. Members of the public sending parcels by railway had been common place up till the late 1950s, but by 1970 had become a thing of the past. This led to a large weighing machine standing forlornly out of use in a corner of the booking hall for many years. The only parcels that arrived by passenger train in 1970 were large boxes of young chicks from the Netherlands. These boxes required stacking up under the down platform shelter followed by a quick telephone call to the delivery address, to ensure a quick collection of the chirping livestock. One notable change took place in the autumn of 1969 when British Railways ceased to carry homing pigeons. St Margarets in the past had seen quite a lot of pigeon traffic arrive at the station for release in the goods yard near the River Lea. A somewhat enjoyable task for the porters with them recording the time of release and sending that information on to the owners. The Buntingford Line stations had been a popular destination for releasing racing pigeons and one can only imagine considerable numbers of the large wicker baskets with noisy pigeons inside being barrowed between the platforms at St Margarets. That was of course only half the job because all those baskets once empty had to be loaded onto convenient passenger trains, back to whence they came. A group of pigeon fanciers based at the Jolly Fisherman pub near the station were to use a converted horse box lorry as a replacement to take their pigeons to the release sites.

At the station up until the 1950s the staff had kept the waiting rooms in immaculate condition with seasonal flowers, a nice blazing fire in the winter and some decorations at Christmas. By 1970 the waiting rooms were sometimes opened during the daytime but were by then sparsely furnished and uncared for. Once staff numbers had been reduced there just was not the time for such niceties anymore. One job carried out every Monday morning by the porter was the swopping of oil lamps in a few shunting signals and the lamps on the level crossing gates. This was a much-diminished task since the old semaphore signals had been replaced by colour lights in the 1950s. Instead of a job that had previously taken a porter most of an eight-hour shift to accomplish, *[including a long walk along the tracks in both directions from the station]*, in 1969 took just an hour or so to complete. Firstly, lamps had their wicks trimmed, reservoirs filled with oil, wick lit, lamp door closed and flame adjusted. These tasks all took place in the lamp room located in the main station building before heading out to change over the lamps, put in place seven days previously.



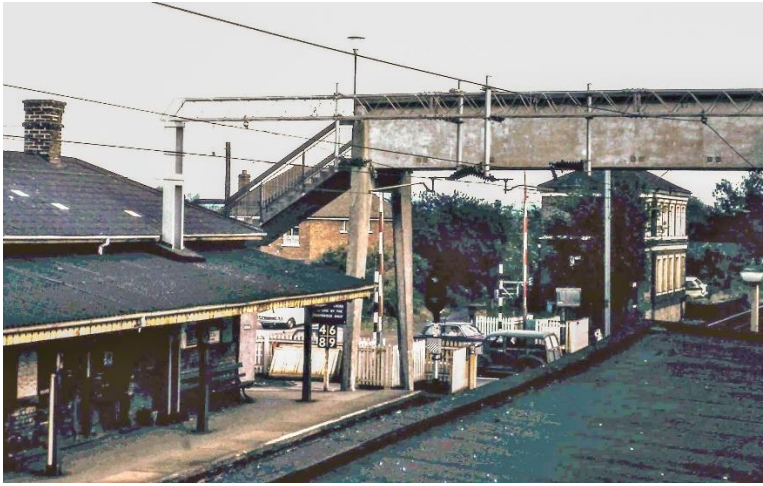
The lamp shown in this picture is typical of the sort of lamp in use at St Margarets station around 1970. Once lit and adjusted it could be lowered into a cast iron lamp casing bolted to a signal or on the top of the old-style level crossing gates. This lamp was made by the Lamp & Railway Supplies Ltd for the LNER company. The burner can be seen through the window and the wick could be adjusted, once the case of the lamp was closed, by the knurled round knob seen to the right just above the paraffin tank. The lamps were designed to burn for at least seven days so, could be left burning both day and night until they were changed. With care three of these lamps could be carried in each hand which reduced the amount of walking needed. It is interesting to consider that similar oil lamps were used at the station from 1843 when the line opened through to the 1980s

The other staff at the station at the time were the signalmen who were collectively on duty 24 hours a day seven days a week. There were theoretically three signalmen appointed to St Margarets Station in 1970 with the rest of the shifts covered by District Relief Signalmen. Due to problems recruiting signalmen only one of the posts at St Margarets was filled. The one permanently appointed signalman was Mr Sam Vincent who lived in Rye House close to railway station in Rye Road and travelled to work by train. He was later to successfully seek promotion to the busier and thus better paid job at the signal box at Roydon railway station.

This view shows St Margarets signal box in the early 1970s, with Mr Sam Vincent standing at the open window. The reason for the large size of the 1887 built box was to accommodate the considerable equipment needed to control a junction station. The box required two solid fuel stoves to keep it tolerably warm in the winter months. The building to the right is an electrical relay room built in the late 1950s when the line was electrified. The box was to remain in use until 2003.



This picture shows the interior of the signal box at St Margarets as it appeared in 1971. The old heavy gates have by this time been removed as well as the large cast iron wheel in the signal box with which the gates were manually wound. The wheel was positioned at the far end of the lever frame as seen in this picture and had been replaced by a shiny grey box with buttons and lights to operate the new barrier type gates. Operating the gates had become a much less physically demanding task, a change much appreciated by the signalling staff. In this picture most of the 55 levers in the box had been painted white, indicating that they were no longer in use. Many of the levers became redundant when the Buntingford branch line closed in 1964/5. The average workload in St Margarets signal box in 1970 was to signal four trains an hour with the night turn man often seeing no trains between 11.30pm and 5.15 am the following morning. On Sundays an hourly service each way made for a leisurely working shift, usually of 12 hours in length.



A 1972 photograph taken from the signal box giving a signalman's view of the crossing when operating the gates. The view of the crossing was very limited and dates from the time there was a gateman down at the level crossing to operate the gates. Two mirrors were provided, one on the platform opposite the box and one that can be seen just beyond the Morris Countryman in the picture. These allowed the signalman to see the otherwise hidden parts of the level crossing.

A view dating from 1969 a year before the old gates were to be replaced. The rodding between and beside the tracks were part of the equipment which allowed the gates to be operated from the signal box. The colour light signal numbered "SM 35" [SM for St Margarets and 35] indicated the lever number in the signal box] stood at the end of the up platform guarding the level crossing from 1959 until 2003.



This 1969 picture shows the old level crossing gates from the western side of the crossing. The traffic light control put in during the 1930s an early example of the use of such lights at level crossings. 1969 was in the days before the bypass and very long queues of traffic could build up in both directions when the gates were closed against the road. The gates are showing damage repairs from vehicles that tried to jump the gates. This frequent and dangerous practice saw many vehicles badly damaged and then their owners charged for the repairs to the gates by the railway. The police would randomly spend an hour or two catching people jumping the lights hoping to deter others. By 1969 the gates, soon to be abolished, tended to be patched up rather than fully repaired as before



One specific job for the signalmen was looking after two occupation level crossings one leading to Stanstead Lock the other to flood plain meadows [now the bird sanctuary] . Both were equipped with telephones for users to call the signal box should they be taking a vehicle or cattle over the crossing. It was the crossing leading to the lock and specifically the cruising club that caused problem with cars sometimes towing boats that without telephoning crossed the tracks, sometimes right in front of oncoming trains. This at least on one occasion almost saw a very large and expensive river cruiser nearly lose its stern in a collision with a train. Serious words were no doubt had with the miscreant and more aware of the possible cost of their errors boaters then followed the safety rules.

In previous years, the goods yard at the station was busy and required railway staff to oversee the work of the goods yard including operating the weighbridge, using the yard's fixed crane, completing the endless paperwork and making arrangements with persons receiving and sending goods by rail. By 1970 the goods yard was mainly used as a convenient storage for wagons awaiting their next use. Even the coal wagon traffic had been diverted to a coal concentration depot at Broxbourne. The coal merchant's lorries collecting the coal from there rather than the most local railway goods yards. The station goods yard at St Margarets by 1970 was bereft of the traditional goods traffic and stood rather forlornly, increasingly weed grown and rarely used.

The railway staff always had to cope with the disruption to the railway caused by the many changes taking place on the railway. This often involved the temporary introduction of buses replacing the train services with the tickets bought at the booking office being valid only on those buses. Such an event took place in October 1970 when the old level crossing gates were replaced by lifting barriers. This led to the temporary closure of the road as well as the railway while the work was carried out.



[Picture by John Weeks the village policeman based at Stanstead Abbots from 1966 to 1970]

The picture was taken on the 18th October 1970 and shows the beginning of the work to remove the old gates. The traffic lights are still showing red never to show a green light again. Pedestrians could of course use the footbridge to cross the railway but it was also a good vantage point to watch the works progress. The green lorry is about where the police would lurk from time-to-time catching drivers jumping the lights. One wonders how many locals took advantage of the extra goodies one could acquire from "TREBLE Green Shield Stamps" available at the station garage.

Days like this would have disrupted the usually predictable sequence of a working day for the railway staff at the station. For some weeks before, railway staff would have been at the station preparing for the replacement of the gates including of course the signalling side. On the day itself the station staff spent much of their time explaining the temporary arrangements to passengers but had no trains to attend to. Meanwhile in the signal box the normally solitary existence of the signalman was replaced by workmen in abundance changing over the equipment to a carefully laid plan in order to get the road and railway back in use within the time allocated for the works completion. No doubt the signal box kettle was very overworked supplying endless cups of tea. It was said that the railway ran on "Coal, steam and tea" although perhaps at St Margarets in 1970 "Electricity and tea." might have been more appropriate.

The obviously much repeated and very important task at the station was to attend to the trains when they stopped at the platforms. Once the signalman had closed the level crossing gates to road traffic and pulled off the relevant signal levers the train would arrive in the station shortly afterwards. By this time the porter was expected to be on the platform ready to ensure folk safely left and boarded the train. Before giving the right of way to the guard he would check it was the correct departure time, that there were no late arrivals hoping to catch the train and that the signal was not showing a red aspect. It was then very important to look along the side of the train to ensure all the doors were securely closed. The porter was aided in this last task as the slam door carriages in use at the time had handles that would only be in the horizontal position if the door was properly closed and safe for the train to move. Once all was correct the porter would blow his whistle and raise his arm to the guard to indicate all was well for the train to leave the station. [The railway issued whistles imprinted with the name "ACME THUNDERER" a high-quality whistle with a loud shrill tone ideal for railway use]. The guard after making his own checks would then ring out a bell code to tell the driver all was well to start the train on its journey to the next stop. The porter of course was also involved in collecting tickets and checking the validity of season tickets, in between and after the other duties. This sequence of tasks was repeated many times every day at the station to ensure the safe working of trains. It is worth a thought that a passenger sees the station at its busiest but for much of the time between trains there are few people about and all is quite tranquil.



An early 1970s view showing a four-car electric multiple unit train [no. 505] from Hertford entering St Margaret's station's up platform. These trains had comfortable, well upholstered high backed seats as well as toilets available for most of the passengers. The small number of first-class compartments provided were very popular with the local affluent commuters, who tended to occupy the same seats in a compartment with the same travelling companions every morning.

Both Jack Sutton and Ernie Marchant were to work on the railway until their retirement. Unfortunately, Ernie Marchant suffered a medical episode which prevented him from continuing to work in a safety critical role. The railway looked after him by giving him a job at Liverpool Street station where he saw his time out working as a ticket inspector. The events described in this article took place between 55 and 52 years ago and it should come as no surprise to learn that most of those who worked at St Margaret's station then have since passed away. This article gives a little glimpse of how the station was worked in a period of just a few years within 180 years plus of continual change from when the station first opened in 1843 up to the present day.